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ABSTRACT

This digest explains five homework strategies appropriate for use with students who have disabilities and which are supported by research. These strategies are: (1) give clear and appropriate assignments (specific tips from both teachers and students are offered); (2) make homework accommodations (eight common accommodations are listed); (3) teach study skills (eight organizational strategies basic to homework are listed); (4) use a homework calendar (an example of how one teacher used such a calendar to increase communication with students' families is offered); and (5) ensure clear home/school communication (suggestions include specific ways that teachers can improve communication with parents and administrators can support teachers). (DB)

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FIVE HOMEWORK STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

By

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Five Homework Strategies for Teaching Students with Disabilities

Cynthia Warger

Homework is one aspect of the general education curriculum that has been widely recognized as important to academic success. Teachers have long used homework to provide additional learning time, strengthen study and organizational skills, and in some respects, keep parents informed of their children's progress. Generally, when students with disabilities participate in the general education curriculum, they are expected to complete homework along with their peers. But, just as students with disabilities may need instructional accommodations in the classroom, they may also need homework accommodations.

Many students with disabilities find homework challenging, and teachers are frequently called upon to make accommodations for these students. What research supports this practice? This digest describes five strategies that researchers have identified to improve homework results for students with disabilities.

Strategy 1. Give Clear and Appropriate Assignments

Teachers need to take special care when assigning homework. If the homework assignment is too hard, is perceived as busy work, or takes too long to complete, students might tune out and resist doing it. Never send home any assignment that students cannot do. Homework should be an extension of what students have learned in class.

To ensure that homework is clear and appropriate, consider the following tips from teachers for assigning homework:

- Make sure students and parents have information regarding the policy on missed and late assignments, extra credit, and available adaptations. Establish a set routine at the beginning of the year.
- Assign work that the students can do.
- Assign homework in small units.
- Explain the assignment clearly.
- Write the assignment on the chalkboard and leave it there until the assignment is due.
- Remind students of due dates periodically.
- Coordinate with other teachers to prevent homework overload.

Students concur with these tips. They add that teachers can

- Establish a routine at the beginning of the year for how homework will be assigned.
- Assign homework toward the beginning of class.
- Relate homework to classwork or real life (and/or inform students how they will use the content of the homework in real life).
- Explain how to do the homework, provide examples and write directions on the chalkboard.
- Have students begin the homework in class, check that they understand, and provide assistance as necessary.
- Allow students to work together on homework.

Strategy 2. Make Homework Accommodations

Make any necessary modifications to the homework assignment before sending it home. Identify practices that will be most helpful to individual students and have the potential to increase their involvement, understanding, and motivation to learn. The most common homework accommodations are to

- Provide additional one-on-one assistance to students.
- Monitor students' homework more closely.
- Allow alternative response formats (e.g., allow the student to audiotape an assignment rather than handwriting it).
- Adjust the length of the assignment.
- Provide a peer tutor or assign the student to a study group.
- Provide learning tools (e.g., calculators).
- Adjust evaluation standards.
- Give fewer assignments.

It is important to check out all accommodations with other teachers, students, and their families. If teachers, students, or families do not find homework accommodations palatable, they may not use them.

Strategy 3. Teach Study Skills

Both general and special education teachers consistently report that homework problems seem to be exacerbated by deficient basic study skills. Many students, particularly students with disabilities, need instruction in study and organizational skills.

Here is a list of organizational strategies basic to homework:

- Identify a location for doing homework that is free of distractions.
- Have all materials available and organized.
- Allocate enough time to complete activities and keep on schedule.
- Take good notes.
- Develop a sequential plan for completing multi-task assignments.
- Check assignments for accuracy and completion before turning them in.
- Know how to get help when it is needed.
- Turn in completed homework on time.

Teachers can enhance homework completion and accuracy by providing classroom instruction in organizational skills. They

EC308385

should talk with parents about how to support the application of organizational skills at home.

Strategy 4. Use a Homework Calendar

Students with disabilities often need additional organizational support. Just as adults use calendars, schedulers, lists, and other devices to self-monitor activities, students can benefit from these tools as well. Students with disabilities can monitor their own homework using a planning calendar to keep track of homework assignments. Homework planners also can double as home-school communication tools if they include a space next to each assignment for messages from teachers and parents.

Here's how one teacher used a homework planner to increase communication with students' families and improve homework completion rates:

Students developed their own homework calendars. Each page in the calendar reflected one week. There was a space for students to write their homework assignments and a column for parent-teacher notes. The cover was a heavy card stock that children decorated. Students were expected to take their homework planners home each day and return them the next day to class.

In conjunction with the homework planner, students graphed their homework return and completion rates—another strategy that is linked to homework completion and improved performance on classroom assessments. The teacher built a reward system for returning homework and the planners. On a self-monitoring chart in their planner, students recorded each time they completed and returned their homework assignment by

- *Coloring the square for the day green if homework was completed and returned.*
- *Coloring the square for the day red if homework was not done.*
- *Coloring one-half of the square yellow and one-half of the square red if homework was late.*

If students met the success criterion, they received a reward at the end of the week, such as 15 extra minutes of recess. The teacher found that more frequent rewards were needed for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities.

Strategy 5. Ensure Clear Home/School Communication

Homework accounts for one-fifth of the time that successful students invest in academic tasks, yet students complete homework in environments over which teachers have no control—which, given the fact that many students experience learning difficulties, creates a major dilemma. Teachers and parents of students with disabilities must communicate clearly and effectively with one another about homework policies, required practices, mutual expectations, student performance on homework, homework completion difficulties, and other homework-related concerns.

Recommended ways that teachers can improve communications with parents include

- Encourage students to keep assignment books.
- Provide a list of suggestions on how parents might assist with homework. For example, ask parents to check with their children about homework daily.
- Provide parents with frequent written communication about homework (e.g., progress reports, notes, letters, forms).
- Share information with other teachers regarding student strengths and needs and necessary accommodations.

Ways that administrators can support teachers in improving communications include

- Supply teachers with the technology needed to aid communication (e.g., telephone answering systems, e-mail, homework hotlines).
- Provide incentives for teachers to participate in face-to-face meetings with parents (e.g., release time, compensation).
- Suggest that the school district offer after school and/or peer tutoring sessions to give students extra help with homework.

Summary

The five strategies to help students with disabilities get the most from their homework are

1. Give clear and appropriate assignments.
2. Make accommodations in homework assignments.
3. Teach study skills.
4. Use a homework planner.
5. Ensure clear home/school communication.

Resources

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